

The Civil War In West Virginia

By Boyd B. Stutler

West Virginia had a major role in the four years long Civil War of the 1860s—a tragic and bitter one, and also one that stands unique in the war experiences of the states that formed the borderland between the two contending sections. There were but few homes within the entire area that did not feel a personal impact of the war and its repercussions, but out of the unrestrained bitterness, the sufferings and the sacrifices emerged a remade nation which was pointed in a new direction. And, of more particular concern to the area in which we live, came a new State—the thirty-fifth in the constellation of the American Union.

For most Americans that period of civil strife has a peculiar fascination, though nearly one hundred years have slipped down the corridor of time since the great armies under Lee and Grant clashed in mortal combat. What happened during those years, for good or evil, is so far away that we can now—or at least we should—view the entire conflict and its causes in their historical perspective, rather than with partisan bias. We can honor those who wore the grey as well as those who wore the blue for what they were and what they did—they were all Americans who spoke the same language, worshipped the same God, and had the same common heritage. These men handed down a new heritage to the generations that followed and will follow in the coming years.

A recent writer said: "The story of this war needs retelling as its centennial comes around, because it helped to shape the future of the human race. Somewhere between Fort Sumter and Appomattox the New World worked out its own destiny, developing an ideal of brotherhood and freedom broad enough to draw all mankind after it." Certainly the story of the Civil War in West Virginia needs retelling, and in the coming centennial years the highlights of that war within our State will be commemorated by appropriate services and ceremonies. And let us insist that these exercises be in the form of commemorations and honor to a generation of great Americans, rather than as celebrations.

West Virginia's war story is one of conflicting loyalties to Virginia and to the Federal Union, and many of the most ruthless events which occurred were in consequence of these conflicting loyalties. Here in the first years of the conflict the area suffered through all the terrors of a border war. Families were divided on the issues, father against son, and brother against brother—and nowhere on the battlefields was this division better exemplified than at the affair at Bulltown, fought October 13, 1863, or at Droop Mountain, November 6, 1863, when some of the troops engaged, Union and Confederate, came from the same counties with brothers on each side of the lines arrayed against each other. And by no means was there unanimity on the political questions, or that of sustaining a secession of a part of the territory from seceded Virginia in order to form a new State.

Fate and circumstance, as well as geographical position, made West Virginia a battle-ground in the early war days and an occupied area throughout the whole four years. It was the buffer between the solidly held Confederate lines and the Ohio River; indeed, it stood between the Confederates and western Pennsylvania and the State of Ohio.

The contribution made by West Virginia in manpower to both the Union and Confederate armies is apparently not well understood. Out of a population of less than four hundred thousand—376,688 in 1860, to be exact—the Restored Government of Virginia at Wheeling and later the State of West Virginia from the limited area under Federal control enlisted, armed and equipped some 32,000 soldiers and sent them into the field. Of this number 29,163 were officially credited to the State and enrolled in West Virginia combat units. Other special troops and men who enlisted in the regiments formed by other states, including 212 Negroes who were assigned to the 45th Infantry, U. S. Colored Troops, amply made up the estimated two thousand difference between the official credits and the estimate. At least two full companies—one each from Hancock and Preston Counties—crossed the border and united with Pennsylvania and Maryland regiments. At the same time, it must be remembered that several full companies recruited in Ohio and Pennsylvania came to West Virginia to become a part of the State's combat units.

For some reason not now known—and perhaps not entirely justified—an estimate of eight thousand soldiers for the Confederate armies has become somewhat standardized. Unfortunately, we have but few personnel records of active Confederate units such as muster and pay-rolls, and the fact that those who entered the Confederate service were so widely scattered in so many different units makes it difficult to arrive at an approximately accurate estimate of their numbers. Recent research, however, indicates strongly that instead of eight thousand a more realistic figure would be ten or perhaps twelve thousand.

There is considerable confusion, also, in the number and numerical designations of the regiments organized for the Union by the two governments at Wheeling—the Restored Government and the State of West Virginia. When one looks at the roster there are apparently thirty-one combat units to consider—but actually this number dwindles to twenty-six separate units when allowance is made for the transfer of regiments from one arm of the service to another and by consolidation of regiments at the expiration of the three-year term of service. Thus, there were three First Infantry Regiments—the three-months organization which fought at Philippi and in the 1861 summer campaign in the Tygarts Valley; the three-year organization, and the First Veteran Infantry, which was formed by a consolidation of the re-enlisted veterans of the Fifth and Ninth Infantry. There were two Second Infantry outfits—the regular three-year regiment organized in the spring of 1861 and the re-enlisted

vets of the First and Fourth Infantry, with recruits and veterans from other units to fill up the ranks, made the Second Veteran Volunteer Infantry.

The Second, Third and Eighth Infantry actually served under three designations—first under their original organization as foot soldiers; then in June 1863, under Brigadier General William W. Averell, they were furnished horses and became mounted infantry, and finally as cavalry, dating from January 26, 1864. The Second Infantry became the Second Mounted, then Fifth Cavalry; the Third was known as the Third Mounted, and finished their war as the Sixth Cavalry fighting the Indians in Nebraska, northern Colorado and the Dakotas, while the Eighth became the Eighth Mounted Infantry, then redesignated as the Seventh Cavalry. The records are somewhat confusing, but when puzzled out it is found that, not deducting the duplications, there were eighteen regiments of infantry, two regiments of veteran volunteer infantry, three regiments of mounted infantry, seven regiments of cavalry, and one regiment of light artillery. From first to last there were 31,884 names on the rolls of these combat units, some of which, of course, were duplicated by re-enlistments.

These were not Home Guards, as many have assumed, but soldiers of the Republic who bore their weight in battles and campaigns from Gettysburg to Vicksburg and Jackson, Mississippi, and from McClellan's Peninsular Campaign in tidewater Virginia to the far western plains of the two Dakotas. The records of the Seventh Infantry and the First Cavalry, to mention only a couple, read like a roll of the battles of the Army of the Potomac—other regiments had equally distinguished service, but not as many battle credits.

On the Southern side there were companies that afterwards became units of the 25th and 31st Virginia Infantry, CSA, that were engaged in the Philippi affair, the first land engagement of the entire war, and finished on an April morning at Appomattox when the Army of Northern Virginia laid down its arms—four years of the most arduous service under Stonewall Jackson in his Valley campaigns, and then under General Lee in his incomparable Army of Northern Virginia. The battle at Scary, the first engagement in the Kanawha Valley, was fought on July 17, 1861, when locally recruited troops under West Virginia officers gained a temporary advantage—something between a victory and a defeat—over the Ohio troops under General Jacob D. Cox. Companies and men who fought there were later incorporated into Colonel George A. Patton's Twenty-Second Virginia Infantry; Colonel John McCausland's Thirty-Sixth Infantry, and Colonel Beuhring Jones' Sixtieth Infantry, as well as in Colonel Albert Gallatin Jenkins' Eighth Virginia Cavalry. These are names to recall with reverence for daring leadership on hard-fought battlefields—two of these men became general officers of the Confederacy, and both Patton and Jenkins were killed in battle. These regiments were still on the firing line at Appomattox on the morning of April 9th, 1865, but with ranks that were pitifully thin.

But to get back to the beginning. Virginia's first overt act of the war was at Harpers Ferry on the night of April 18, 1861, just one day after the passage of the Ordinance of Secession by the Convention then in session at Richmond, when Virginia militia under the command of Major General Kenton Harper, of Staunton, occupied the town and took over the extensive United States Armory and Arsenal. There was no opposition; Lieutenant Roger Jones, with his Armory guard of forty-five soldiers, set fire to the government works and retreated across the Potomac on the approach of Harper's Virginia troops. It was a bloodless coup, but it was definitely an act of war.

Harpers Ferry was made the mobilization center of the volunteer companies of all northern Virginia and under a certain Colonel Thomas J. Jackson, whom history knows as Stonewall, these volunteers were formed into regiments which became the Stonewall Brigade. One of these regiments, the Second Infantry, had in its original ranks five companies from Jefferson County and two from Berkeley. Another company in that famous brigade was the Shriver Grays of Wheeling, which became Company G, Twenty-Seventh Infantry.

On May 4th, Colonel George A. Porterfield, then at Harpers Ferry, received orders to proceed to Grafton and organize an army there from local enlistments—it seemed to be taken for granted that the western counties were ablaze with secession sentiment and that a popular uprising would occur when the call came. Porterfield had an assigned task to organize his troops, push on to Wheeling and the Ohio River and to take over or immobilize the lines of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. Recruiting was slow and Porterfield, in the face of advancing Union forces, withdrew his few troops to Philippi. It was there that he was surprised and routed in the early morning of June 3rd—the first land engagement of the war—and the speed with which the Confederate troops left the town caused the affair to be dubbed the "Philippi races." Most historians are agreed that the affair, slight as it was, had historical and tactical significance of great import.

The importance of the battle of Philippi can not be measured alone by the fact that it was the first serious land engagement of the war, nor by the number of men engaged—and certainly not by the fact that there were none—killed and but few wounded. It was the tactical and strategic factor that gave the affair an importance far beyond that of many greater engagements when massed armies clashed for a temporary advantage, only to be swept away by a resurgence of the opposing army the next day. It was at Philippi—and a month later at Scary—at the very outset of the great conflict that the Southern army was halted and turned back. In the subsequent campaigns in the summer of 1861 in the Kanawha, Tygarts and New River valleys, the Confederate frontier was fixed on the line of the Alleghenies rather than on the Ohio River and, indeed in the State of Ohio. For the

rest of the war the West Virginia area served as a buffer—Ohio was safe from an invasion from the east.

Next year, the centennial of the battle will be observed in a week-long commemoration at Philippi, culminating on June 3rd—the actual centennial date—with the re-enactment of the surprise and rout. The State of Ohio, through its Civil War Centennial Commission, will join with the local committee in the commemoration—in fact, Ohio has made the summer campaign of 1861 in the Tygarts and Kanawha valleys, where Ohio troops had their first taste of field action, one of its chief objectives for observance in 1961.

Philippi was only the beginning. Before the war ended in April, 1865, nearly five hundred armed clashes between Union and Confederate troops were fought in West Virginia. These are officially classified as actions, affairs, battles, engagements, skirmishes, raids, incursions, and whatnot depending upon the severity of the clash, the number of troops engaged and also sometimes gauged by the number of casualties. Every county in our State, save the five that border on the Ohio River north of Wood, had from one to many such clashes, but in these five counties the enrolled militia—men subject to military service but not in the regular establishment—were called out from time to time to repel dashing cavalry raids, or to set up safety patrols and guard detachments at various points. After the formation of West Virginia forty-four companies of Home Guards were organized, comprising some 2,300 men, as an internal security defense force. These companies were distributed about over the State, but with heavier concentration in sections where irregulars and guerrillas were most active—these roaming bands of irregulars, nominally Confederate but preying on citizens on both sides, created terror throughout the war, but more particularly in the central counties. The Home Guards were State troops and though they acted at times with Federal units, they were not subject to call outside the State.

With approximately 40,000 men in regular service on both sides—one man out of every ten persons counted in 1860, or possibly one out of every eight or nine—there would arise, naturally, competent military leaders in the companies, regiments and in general officer rank. There were many who made exceptional records as combat leaders—men whose leadership deserves to be remembered and recorded—but in this brief paper we can only consider those who attained the rank of general officer. West Virginia furnished fourteen generals in the various grades to the Union armies, and seven to the Confederate States. It is regrettable that some of them have been almost forgotten in their homeland.

In the Union army the system of promotion was rather complicated and involved. There were three grades of general officers—those commissioned in the Regular Army, those commissioned in

the United States Volunteers, and brevet rank in both branches. That is, an officer would be promoted by brevet to a higher rank while still holding his commission in an inferior grade; this was done when no vacancy in the authorized tables of organization permitted the issuance of a full commission. The Confederate army had no such fine distinctions.

The Federal Generals who were commissioned in full rank in the temporary U. S. Volunteer army were Major General Jesse Lee Reno, born at Wheeling, but who entered West Point and the military service from Pennsylvania; killed in the battle of South Mountain, Maryland, September 14, 1862, while commanding the Ninth Army Corps; Brigadier General Benjamin F. Kelley, Brevet Major General, of Wheeling, First Infantry; Brigadier General Joseph A. J. Lightburn, Lewis County, Fourth Infantry; Brigadier General Isaac H. Duval, Brevet Major General, Brooke County, Ninth Infantry; Brigadier General William H. Powell, Brevet Major General, Wheeling, Second Cavalry, and Brigadier General Thomas Maley Harris, Brevet Major General, of Glenville and Harrisville, Tenth Infantry.

Those who held the rank of brigadier general by brevet only were Robert S. Northcott, of Clarksburg, Twelfth Infantry; John H. Oley, Seventh Cavalry; David H. Strother, of Berkeley Springs, Third Cavalry; Milton Wells, Fifteenth Infantry; John S. Witcher, Cabell County, Third Cavalry; Henry Capehart, Brevet Major General, Wheeling, First Cavalry; William B. Curtis, West Liberty, Twelfth Infantry, and Rufus E. Fleming, Sixth Cavalry.

On the Southern side were Lieutenant General Thomas J. (Stonewall) Jackson, born at Clarksburg, appointed to West Point from Lewis County, but who entered the Civil War from Lexington, Virginia; mortally wounded at Chancellorsville, Virginia, on May 3, 1863, and who is famed as one of the great military leaders of all time. The others were Brigadier Generals John McCausland, Putnam County; Albert Gallatin Jenkins, Cabell County; John Echols, Monroe County; William L. Jackson, Wood County; Edwin Gray Lee, Jefferson County; and Birkett D. Fry, born in Kanawha County, but who entered the Civil War from Alabama, after service in the War with Mexico and filibustering with Walker in Nicaragua.

In many ways other than in manpower West Virginia made important contributions to the war effort, more especially to the Federal Union. The population was sparse and much of the area was undeveloped, but time after time Confederate cavalry raiding forces dashed into the section ranging all the way from Preston and Monongalia Counties on the north to Wayne and Mercer on the south and west. Favorite targets were the salt-rich Kanawha Valley, the lines of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, and such industrial centers as the Burning Springs oil fields. And in each instance farms were despoiled and great droves of livestock—horses, cattle, sheep and

hogs—were driven off to feed or serve the Confederate armies in the field.

Probably the most important contribution, however, next after the fact of holding the western counties firm in loyalty to the Federal Union and in the creation of West Virginia, was the preservation of the lines of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, which Dr. Festus Summers has aptly termed "Mr. Lincoln's Lifeline." I think he could not have devised a better or more appropriate title for his upcoming revision and reissue of his history of the railroad in the Civil War.

In turn, the railroad played a conspicuous—though perhaps not vital—part in the formation of West Virginia. The lines were so important to the Federal war effort that it seemed necessary to keep them in friendly territory and under control of Federal troops, thus the three Eastern Panhandle counties—Jefferson, Berkeley and Morgan—through which the lines pass, literally rode into the new State on the cowcatchers of B. & O. locomotives.

Every county—and almost every locality—has its own story of Civil War action and incident. Some suffered more than others through ruthless excesses, house burnings and killings, not all of which was even condoned by the military authorities. Romney, in the South Branch Valley, for instance, suffered greatly and its countryside almost laid waste. Located in a natural invasion route, the town changed hands fifty-six times during the course of the war; sometimes without a fight, one army leaving as the other approached, but there was enough of fighting, pillage and senseless burnings that Romney had but little left at the end of the war.

It is indeed unfortunate that so little has been written about the war in West Virginia, or so little is available today to the general public. Our war was overshadowed by the greater events in the broader theaters—what we do have, for the most part, is incidental to a general work encompassing a broader scope—but there is yet time to record and make the story known. Of the twenty-six combat regiments only five have separately published histories, and these are so scarce as to be almost unobtainable. One of the main objectives of the Civil War Centennial Commission of West Virginia is to encourage the writing and publication of books, brochures, magazine and newspaper articles dealing with the conflict in its various phases, civil, political and military.